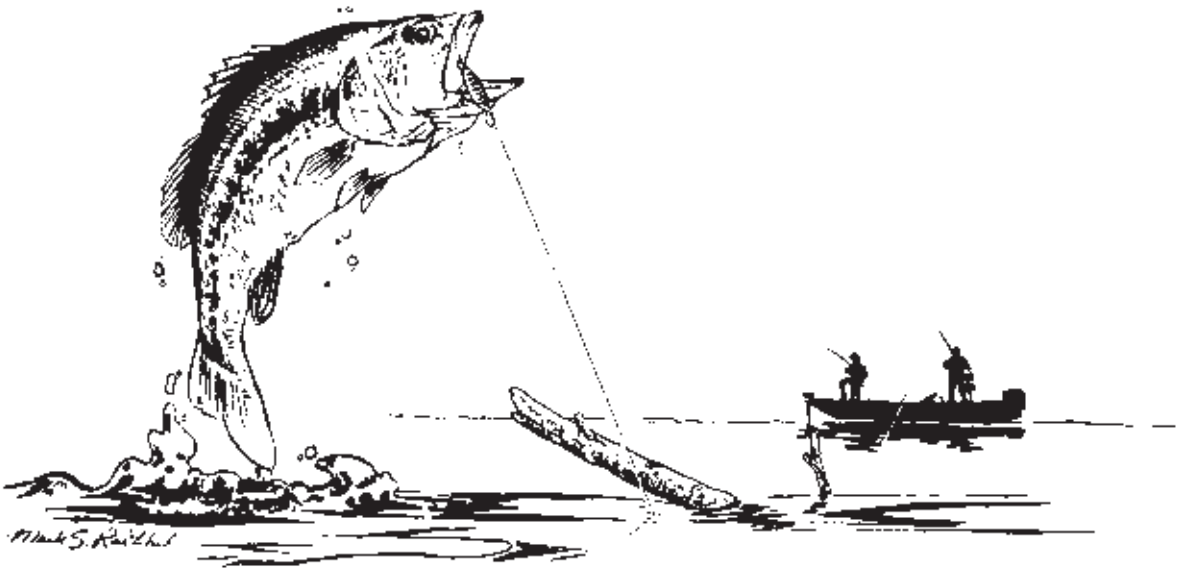
AQUAGUIDE

Missouri Department of Conservation—*Fish and Other Aquatic Life*

Stockpiled Bass: A Common Pond Owner Complaint



Missouri has many privately owned ponds and lakes that provide wonderful fishing opportunities. Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) fisheries staff receive calls daily from frustrated pond owners unhappy with the low numbers of big largemouth bass that their ponds produce.

A pond owner will typically complain, "I have a pond on my property. Three or four years ago, we caught a lot of two to three pound bass. We didn't keep any fish less than 12 inches long. Now we can only catch little bass. Did we harvest all the large bass?" After a few questions about their pond, their fishing habits and the sizes of other fish in the pond, it becomes evident the pond has a stockpiled bass population.

Stockpiled Bass

A stockpiled bass population contains an over abundance of slow-growing bass that do not reach a large size because there is not enough food.

Ponds with stockpiled bass populations are characterized by numerous 8- to 12-inch bass. The fish obtain enough food to stay alive, but not enough to grow very much. These fish may have long, skinny bodies, hollow bellies and disproportionately large heads. Many people assume that these are young fish; however, they may be several years old. Most will die of natural causes without ever reaching a desirable size. The practice of releasing these fish to grow bigger only compounds the problem, because this condition most often occurs when adequate numbers of smaller bass are not harvested.

High numbers of small bass can result from a number of circumstances. The most common situation involves a pond where bass harvest is very limited and bass reproduction is very good. Under these circumstances, bluegill, a favorite prey of bass, cannot produce enough young to adequately feed the large numbers of bass. If bluegills are absent, the situation is usually more severe.

Other factors, such as water clarity and excessive levels of aquatic vegetation, can lead to slow growth and stockpiling of bass. Largemouth bass are sight feeders, therefore muddy water and excessive quantities of aquatic plants keep bass from capturing enough food to maintain adequate growth.

Conversely, bluegill may grow large in a pond with stockpiled largemouth bass. The few small bluegill that escape being eaten will grow to a large size because they don't have to compete against hordes of other bluegill for food.

Stockpiling Solutions

If bass underharvest and high reproduction are problems, the first thing a pond owner should do is increase bass harvest. A common harvest regulation used in this situation is a slot length limit. Anglers should be encouraged to harvest fish less than 12 inches long, but to return to the water, unharmed, all fish between 12 and 15 inches. Bass longer than 15 inches may be harvested or released depending on angler preference.

Removing many of the smaller bass makes more food available for the remaining fish. The net effect of the slot length limit is to reduce the number of stockpiled bass and improve overall bass growth.

Landowners south of the Missouri River should harvest 20–25 bass per acre per year. Those with ponds in north Missouri (where soils are richer and pond fish populations larger) should harvest 30–35 bass per acre per year. One experienced angler can harvest the desired number of fish in a one half-acre pond. Owners with larger ponds and lakes may seek assistance from friends and other anglers to harvest enough fish. Scout groups and other youth and civic organizations are good sources of willing anglers. A daily limit of six bass applies to a ponds previously stocked by the Department, or are connected to streams. Ponds with documented private stocking from commercial sources are exempt from limits. (See section 3CSR10-9.110 of the *Wildlife Code*.)

If bluegill stocking is required, add about 200 fish at least 4 inches long per acre. Bluegill should be protected from harvest for at least two years. Increasing the harvest of bass usually results in greater production of young bluegill, which in turn, will lead to increased bass growth. Returning a stockpiled bass lake or pond to good fishing condition takes time. Patience is important; it may take several years to restore a balanced fish population in a small pond and even longer in a large lake.

The following table can help you to determine whether your pond has a stockpiled bass population. Go fishing at least five different times throughout the fishing season. For bass, use a variety of artificial lures, minnows or crayfish. Worms or crickets on a small hook are good baits for catching bluegill.

Selective harvest of fish, in addition to good record keeping (see our Aquaguide on *Good Record Keeping Means Better Fishing*), should help maintain the quality largemouth bass fishing most pond owners desire.

For more information on pond or lake management or to contact your regional MDC fisheries personnel go to **mdc.mo.gov**.

Test	Diagnosis	Recommendation
1. Can you see your hand 12 inches below the surface?	Yes No	Go to #2. Correct water clarity problem. Consult Aquaguide *Clearing Ponds that have Turbid (Muddy) Water*.
2. Does 10–25 percent of your pond contain rooted aquatic vegetation or other prime fish habitat?	Yes No	Go to #3a, 3b or 3c. Consult Aquaguides on Aquatic Weed Control and Maintenance.
3a. You usually catch fewer than five bass per hour of fishing. Some are longer than 12 inches, with a few longer than 15 inches. Bluegill caught are generally between four and seven inches in length.	Your pond has a well-balanced fish population.	Keep accurate records of the fish you catch. Good records will help you or fisheries staff with pond management decisions. Consult Aquaguide *Good Record Keeping Means Better Fishing*.
3b. You often catch more than five bass per hour. Few are longer than 12 inches and fish longer than 15 inches are rare. Bass may appear long and skinny with overly large heads. Most bluegill caught are longer than six inches.	Your pond has a stockpiled bass population.	Correct problem by increasing the harvest of smaller bass. If your management goal is to catch big bluegill, maintain a high population of small bass. Consult Aquaguide *Managing for Large Bluegill.*
3c. Bass population appears very similar to that in #3b with few or no bluegill or other prey species seen or caught.	Your pond has a stockpiled bass population and a serious food shortage.	Stock 200 bluegill per acre (greater than four inches long). Don't harvest bluegill for two years. Increase harvest of smaller bass as in #3b.

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